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ABSTRACT

To discover whether the typical college reading course repairs students' phonic disabilities to a significant degree and whether students who are severely phonically disabled benefit from the treatment provided in such courses, a study was undertaken involving students in 14 classes. Instruction for those students in the developmental reading classes (the experimental condition) focused on vocabulary development, reading rate, comprehension, and study skills. Those in the English classes (the control condition) received instruction in grammar, usage, and composition skills. No specific or discrete instruction in aural decoding skills or phonic analysis was provided in any of the classes. It was found that both groups achieved statistically significant gains while the difference in gains between the groups was not significant. However, the total gain in the reading class was such that the average student who exhibited serious phonic disablement before the experiment was still classified as seriously phonically disabled upon completing the class. (TJ)

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YET ANOTHER LOOK AT COLLEGE DEVELOPMENTAL READING COURSES

The developmental reading course is ordinarily included as an integral component of developmental (compensatory/remedial) programs in post-secondary institutions. (15) During the last forty years, courses in developmental reading have, and to the concern of critics, multiplied on college campuses to the extent that this proliferation can be considered big business and even as an industry that is preoccupied with its self-perpetuation. (17) Therefore, research focusing on the effectiveness of developmental reading offerings might be of interest to those responsible for the content, emphases, and direction of these courses.

Background

A review of the research and related literature encourages the following perceptions concerning college-level developmental reading courses as they are typically conducted.

-- The objectives as well as the methodologies applied in most developmental reading programs have not changed essentially during the last forty-seven years. (9,17)

-- The typical developmental reading program is designed with an emphasis

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on the development of comprehension, vocabulary, reading rate and study skills. (9,10,17)

-- Such courses characteristically ignore aural decoding or "phonics" as an instructional strategy. (9,10,17)

-- The training and competency of reading instructors is not sufficient for them to provide appropriate instruction in phonic analysis, even if such treatment were deemed desirable. (6,7,11,12)

-- A high proportion of students enrolled in college developmental reading programs can be measured as experiencing from slight to severe degrees of phonic disablement. (1,3,9,10)

-- College students' ability in word recognition (13) and aural decoding skills (1,3,14) is related or prerequisite to reading comprehension.

Such conditions, then, give rise to two questions: 1) Does the typical college reading course repair students' phonic disabilities to a significant degree, and 2) do students who are severely phonically disabled benefit from the treatment provided in the course?

Littrell (10) attacked the first question directly, reporting a study indicating that phonically disabled students completing a typical junior college developmental reading class enjoyed measurable improvement in phonic skills, even though the class did not employ strategies or programs specifically designed to reduce phonic disability.

Comparing an experimental group (students in a developmental reading class: N=43) with a control group (students in a first-year English class: N=15), Littrell identified phonically disabled students via a pre-test on the California Phonics Survey. CPS post-test gains showed that the reading students enjoyed statistically significant (.05 level) gains over the English students. He concluded that "junior college students had their phonic

disability reduced when they were enrolled in a typical junior college reading class." (10:151)

Noticing that the samples in this study were comparatively small and were taken from a Mid-western college, we posed the following question: what would happen if the essential thrust of the study were replicated employing larger samples, a variety of instructors, and college students in another region?

The study

During the 1977 spring semester and summer session, a total of fourteen classes taught by nine seasoned instructors and involving a measured population of 469 students in a large, urban, California community college were studied. The testing, dropout, and sorting experience of this population appear in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Testing, Dropout, and Sorting Experience of Measured Population (N=469)

Class	Initially Enrolled and Pre-Tested		Dropout		Coenrolled and Eliminated From Study		Not Phonically Disabled and Eliminated From Study		Completed Course and Post-Tested	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Reading	212	(100.0)	71	(35.5)	26	(12.3)	9	(4.2)	106	(50.0)
English	257	(100.0)	103	(40.0)	26	(10.2)	15	(5.8)	113	(44.0)

This experience and treatment occasioned "refined" experimental and control groups (N=106 and 113 respectively). These groups can be considered to be reasonably congruent since students in both groups were those whose total entry-level percentile scores on the New Purdue Test in English ranged from the 17th to 57th percentile. (4,8)

Following the conditions and design of the Littrell study, reading classes focused on vocabulary development, reading rate, comprehension and study skills--the skills emphasized in the typical college developmental reading course. (9,10) The English classes involved instruction primarily in grammar, usage, and compositional skills. Of course no specific or discrete instruction in aural decoding skills or phonic analysis was provided students in any of these classes.

Results

The mean CPS pre-post test scores of the experimental group were compared (see Table 2) to learn that developmental reading students experienced a mean 3.13 gain, which is statistically significant.

TABLE 2

Comparison of Pre- and Post-Test Scores
For Experimental Group

	N	Mean	SD
Pre-Test	106	54.83	10.53
Post-Test	106	57.96	9.80

t=2.21 Significant at the .05 level

But when scores of students in the English classes were treated similarly (see Table 3), statistically significant gains were also achieved, although these students experienced slightly lower (2.86 points) measured mean growth.

TABLE 3

Comparison of Pre- and Post-Test Scores
For Control Group

	N	Mean	SD
Pre-Test	113	54.06	10.36
Post-Test	113	56.92	9.18

t=2.18 Significant at the .05 level

Finally, to learn whether the compared performances of these groups were significant, the t-test of two differences statistical technique was employed (see Table 4), yielding a .27 point gain difference in favor of the experimental group but a t-value indicating non-significance.

TABLE 4

Pre- and Post-Test Score Comparison
Of Experimental and Control Groups

	N	Mean	SD
Pre-Test, Exp. Gp.	106	54.83	10.53
Post-Test, Exp. Gp.	106	57.96	9.80
Pre-Test, Cont. Gp.	113	54.06	10.38
Post-Test, Cont. Gp.	113	56.92	9.18

t=0.025 Not Significant

Therefore, this study yields findings contrary to Littrell's. Students completing a developmental reading class do not, when compared to a control group, appreciably reduce their phonic disabilities, at least not in this instance. Nor does a .27 of a point gain difference on a 70 point test appear to be substantial.

Discussion

While a developmental reading course can produce statistically significant gains for those students (66.5%) who manage to complete it, is their mean gain (3.13 points) on the CPS very meaningful in terms of overcoming difficulties in phonic analysis? Other research together with this study's findings provides an answer to this question. According to Brown and Cottrell (1), students scoring between 46 and 57 on the CPS are classified as having "serious" phonic disabilities; those scoring between 58 and 69 are classified as having "some" disablement. Again, the mean CPS pre-test score for students in the experimental group was 54.83, and their mean post-test score was 57.96. This means that the

average student upon enrolling in the developmental reading class exhibited "serious" phonic disablement; and upon completing the class, the average student did not escape this classification, although he came within .04 of a point of doing so. Such gain, then, viewed pragmatically, cannot be considered cause for celebration.

Additional data were analyzed to learn that (1) sex, instructional time of day, and duration of course are not factors that influence students' decrease in phonic disabilities and (2) students' degree of phonic disablement is not predictive of success (grade) in a developmental reading course. These findings are consistent with other research on this topic--or issue. (9)

But what about the dropouts, the students who did not survive the course--for whatever reason? The mean entry-level CPS score of students (N=106) completing the developmental reading course was compared with the mean score experienced by the students (N=71) who had dropped the course (see Table 5).

TABLE 5

Comparison of Pre-Test Mean Scores
Of Experimental and Dropout Groups

	N	Mean	SD
Experimental Group	106	54.83	10.53
Dropout Group	71	49.40	11.95

t=3.10 Significant at the .01 level

This comparison indicates that the difference in the pre-test scores was significant at the .01 level. Therefore, students' CPS scores are highly predictive of their dropout potential in a developmental reading class. Since the 71 students who dropped the developmental reading classes constituted 33.5 percent of the population initially enrolled, it is apparent that the degree of a students' phonic disablement poses decided implications involving retention, preparation, and curriculum.

Implications

The essential implications yielded and directions suggested by this study are two-fold.

First of all, this study supports substantive research and responsible opinion that has been reported through the past forty years--that, for most students, competency in aural decoding skills is a sub-skill essential and perhaps prerequisite to reading comprehension. (1,2,3,5,14,16) Cottrell has summarized this position succinctly: "Students' ability in phonetic analysis is necessary but not sufficient for reading in the English language." (3:32)

Finally, inasmuch as many students enrolled in college developmental reading courses can be identified as phonically disabled, some accommodation needs to be made to help them eliminate or minimize this deficiency at least in more severe and apparently high risk cases. Otherwise, the instruction implemented in the typical college developmental reading course is not liable to be very effective--if, indeed, the student survives the course. Such does not suggest that college reading practitioners should immediately pursue the notion that instituting "phonics" courses affords a necessarily effective or solitary solution. It does suggest, however, that, until students' aural decoding skills are sufficiently improved, those responsible should continue to reassess their developmental reading programs with constructive dissatisfaction.

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